

Holy Instruments

In the name of him through whom we have received grace upon grace, dear friends in Christ: what do you think of when I mention the following items: a handgun, a knife, and a claw hammer? Pause for a moment to consider what they are and what they might be used for: a handgun, a knife, and a claw hammer ...

... Okay, now that you've thought about it for a bit, allow me to do some thinking out loud for the group. Starting the list as I did with the gun, one of your first thoughts may have been that all three items could be used as a weapon, something that might be used to threaten or hurt somebody or even commit murder. To be sure, a handgun is pretty much useless as anything but a weapon. It isn't very good for hunting; it's not accurate beyond the shortest of ranges. And though you might try to drive nails with it, that wouldn't be very efficient. I suppose you could use it as a club, but that's a weapon too. The knife is a lot more versatile. Yes, you might stab someone with it; but knives are used for cutting and shaping all kinds of things: wood, plastic, carpet, you name it. An artist might use one to make a beautiful carving. In the hands of a chef, a knife can help make a fine meal. In the hands of a surgeon, it can save lives. And then there's the hammer: while you *could* hit someone with it, it's not primarily a weapon – though when I use one I usually end up with a smashed finger or thumb, and I consider that a form of assault. A hammer is not nearly as versatile as a knife. It's mostly for driving (or pulling) nails. But in that capacity, it's really the only tool for the job.

The point I want to stress is that each item on my list could be used for good or for evil purposes. And I know that some might balk at the idea of a gun being used for good; but you can't deny that police officers and soldiers carry guns to protect us from harm – and that's good. I have a small handgun that I use mostly to dispatch undesirable rodents, and I think that's good. (Is there such a thing as a desirable rodent?)

All right, the reason I wanted you to think about this is because it's what Paul is talking about in today's Epistle. He writes, "Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness." Understand that when he speaks of members, he means the various parts of your body: eyes, ears, hands, feet, and so on. And the Greek word he uses that is translated "instrument" means primarily a weapon; but in the context it can also mean a tool, an implement, or any device that's fashioned to do a job or perform a function. So what he's saying is, "Don't let the parts of your body be tools for evil; instead let them be *holy* instruments, that is, tools set aside for the exclusive use of God and for his purposes of doing good."

Paul writes these words originally to the Christians in Rome. A few of them probably had Jewish backgrounds, but most of them had been idol worshipping pagans prior to coming to faith in Jesus. And referring to their former lives, Paul tells them in those days you were slaves to sin. Your various members were tools in the hands of Satan only capable of accomplishing evil, and doing whatever your unholy lusts and passions led you to do. But those days are over. You were redeemed. By God's grace and the power of his Holy Spirit you've come to faith in Jesus who bought you back from that living death by the blood he shed for you on the cross. In Jesus you have been given a new life: a life freed from sin and its domination. And in this new life you have the capacity to choose what you do with your members – or rather, whom they will

serve. You can let them be servants of sin and evil as in the past, or you can let them be holy instruments in the hands of the Lord.

Regarding the first option, that is, choosing to let yourself be a slave of sin and your members tools of unrighteousness, Paul says, why would you do that? Don't you know that sin leads to death? Think about what you used to do – and how you're so ashamed of those filthy things now. Why would you want to go back to that, especially now that you've been set free from bondage to sin? No. Don't let the fact that you are now under grace and have been forgiven be a license to continue in sin. That would be a terrible misuse, a despising of the Gospel by which you were saved. And if you continue down that path, you'll only enslave yourself once more to the evil master from which you were set free. And then you will die in sin and unbelief and be lost forever. Rather, Paul says, always choose the second option. In any and every circumstance present your members to the Lord for his use. Be a slave to righteousness because that leads to holiness. And for that you were made.

Paul's instruction to the Roman Christians was spot on. They would have been keenly aware of how far they'd come from the days when they worshipped idols and freely engaged in all manner of immoral behavior that was then viewed by them as acceptable – even commendable. They would have seen the sharp contrast between their lives now and then and taken his words to heart. It's a bit different for us because so few are adult converts to the Christian faith. Most of us were baptized as infants and have been Christians for as long as we can remember. We don't have memories of living as pagans. That's a good thing, because it means we have been spared from having the guilt of the vile things that routinely happened as part of pagan worship and life on our consciences. But I hasten to add that we are still sinners from birth and equally capable of indulging in all manner of evil. And so Paul's instruction about choosing to make our members instruments of holiness rather than of sin applies equally to us.

So, with that in mind, I'd like to be a lot more specific. Let's do an inventory of the tools at our disposal and ask, what am I doing with my members? Who is my master? Am I a slave to sin, or am I serving the Lord with my members? We'll start with the eyes. They have been called the window to the soul, not because others can see your soul through them, but because it's through your eyes that other things get into your soul. What are you letting in? What are you looking at? I don't need to tell you that there's all kinds of junk out there that ought not be let in. Oh, it's readily available all right; on television, in books and magazines, and now what's probably the biggest temptation: the internet – from which you can in the privacy of your own home view every form of ungodly behavior imaginable (and some, perhaps, that are beyond imagination). At the same time, there's all kinds of good that you could be letting in. It's through the eyes that you read God's Word, that you admire the beauty of his creation, that you see the people he made in his image for you to love and serve. So, let me ask again: what are you letting into your soul through your eyes. Is it darkness, or is it light?

And while we're on the eyes, we can also ask: *How* are you looking? Are you using your eyes to see things that you covet: the wealth, the success, the rich man's toys of others – which you judge with your eyes them not to be deserving of? How are you looking? Are you seeing only things to complain about, or are you seeing opportunities to make things better? Are you seeing the weaknesses and faults of others so that you can see yourself better than they are, or are you seeing how you might be able to help them improve their lives? Are you using your eyes as instruments of good or of evil?

Well, how about your ears? What's getting into your soul through them? What are you listening to? The latest gossip? Salacious stories about you-know-who? Crass and profane

jokes? Songs with lyrics you would blush to hear me speak from the pulpit? Or are you listening to that which is true, instructive, edifying, and helpful to the soul? We could also ask, what are you *not* listening to? What have you shut your ears from hearing? God's command concerning some pet sin? A friend or family member's constructive criticism offered in love? Somebody's cry for help? What are you deliberately *not* hearing?

Another good question about how you are using your ears is, to *whom* are you listening? I recently read an article that asked the question: who are your preachers? The author's point was that are constantly listening to the voices of others who offer instruction, advice, and counsel – who present to us their worldview. His questions were, are they qualified to give it? What's their agenda? Is their worldview a biblical one? For some of the biggest names in what's called Christian television and publishing, the answer to the last question is a resounding no. The same can be said for so many of the pundits and perpetually angry talk show hosts and other self appointed sages of our age to whom people flock for words of guidance: the O'Reilly's, Becks, Oprah's, and Doctor Phil's. And your preachers don't have to be famous or hold an office. More than once I've heard from a partner in a troubled marriage, "All my friends are telling me that my spouse is no good for me and that I should get a divorce." To which I respond, "Yes, that's what *they're* telling you; but what does God say? To *whom* are you listening? To your friends or to the Lord? Are your ears tools of sin or instruments of righteousness leading to holiness?

What about your mouth? How are you using it? As a weapon to lash out and destroy others, or as a salve to heal wounds and strengthen relationships? What are you saying? What words are you speaking? You know that old line about sticks and stones breaking bones, but words never hurting is one of the biggest lies in the book. I doubt that there is anyone here who doesn't bear the still aching scars of hurtful words spoken in anger – words that once spoken can never be retracted, words that will always sting their victims. Are you doing the same to others? And that only has to do with what you say to someone's face. What about the words you say behind their backs? Is your mouth a tool to curse or to bless, to harm or to help, to tear down reputations or to build them up? It's not like you can't control it. You can't help from seeing and hearing some things; but you always decide what words come out of your mouth. It can be a weapon of mass destruction or an instrument of God for prayer, for praise, for witnessing, and for encouraging others. You can use your mouth to speak the very words of God by which he gives life and salvation.

We come to the mind – a power tool if ever there was one, a tool that drives all the rest. What's going on in there? What thoughts are you thinking? With your mind are you serving good or evil? Now, someone might protest, "I can't help thinking bad thoughts." That's true. Because of the sin nature that adheres to us, we all think evil things. I like the way Luther put it, though. He said, "I can't stop the birds from flying over my head; but I can keep them from making nests in my hair." He meant, of course, that though evil thoughts kept popping up, he didn't have to dwell on them. He didn't have to feed and nurture them. That's what we often do. We let anger, lusts, envy, and temptations build themselves a home in our heads. We brood over the hurts and slights we've received, and we construct elaborate fantasies of revenge. We could be using our minds to increase in wisdom, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. We could be training our minds to be more efficient and full of useful information. We could be feeding them with healthy and nutritious data instead of junk food. How are you using your mind? As a tool for good or for evil?

Hands are next. The question is: what are you doing with them? Works of sin or righteousness? Works that serve your sinful self, or works that serve others? With the same

hand you can make a fist and punch someone or you can lend them a helping hand. Which will it be? This is another tool you are in complete control over. And it's important to stay busy. There's a lot of truth to that old saying that idle hands are the devil's workshop. It's when we've got nothing constructive to do that we go looking for trouble. And perhaps this is more of a perception problem, because if you look around there are always plenty of good things that need to be done. Are your hands doing them?

How about your feet? The question here is where are they taking you? To places you ought to be or to places that are best avoided? This is a question to ask especially on Sunday mornings. Are my feet taking me to where I need to be to hear God's Word and receive his gifts of grace, or are they taking me to someplace else I'd rather be? We could also ask, with whom are you going? It was wise King Solomon who said bad company corrupts good character. Are you using your feet as instruments to serve God or to serve sin?

Finally, let's talk about the total package: your entire body. It too is a tool that can be used for good or for evil. And like any tool, to do what it was made for means maintaining it and taking proper care of it. That's just good stewardship. We sin when we neglect to do so. At the same time, we want to be wary of falling into sin by fixating on appearance and fashion by which we might end up worshipping our bodies rather than the God who made them to be temples of his Holy Spirit. Along these same lines, this discussion wouldn't be complete if I didn't mention the way God made our bodies to be used sexually only within the context of the estate of holy marriage. Any intimate use other than the one flesh union of husband and wife that God intends is sinful rebellion and a scandalous misuse of his great gift.

Okay, I could on with the many ways we can use our members as instruments of good or evil; but I think we've already got plenty to chew on – and to repent of. In closing, I want to stress just how important all of this is. God redeemed you from sin and death by the blood of Jesus. By his Word and Spirit, he called you to saving faith in this Gospel, and he made you his own. He made you his holy instrument, someone set aside to do his will. Now, all of us would be rightly horrified if vandals were to break into this sanctuary and use the altar here as a toilet. We'd be offended that this holy table from which Christ gives us his body and blood was defiled. What I want you to see is that when you use your members to sin it should be even more offensive to you. Christ didn't die for this table. He died for you to make you holy. Yes, from here he gives his body and blood – but he puts them into you to make you holy, to make your members holy instruments that serve him in righteousness.

My prayer is that our gracious God would give to all us this sense of indignation when we choose to make our members instruments of sin so that, being properly appalled, we may repent wholeheartedly and turn from our sins with loathing. And receiving again Christ's word of forgiveness which strengthens and renews our faith, that we may strive always to use our members as instruments holy to the Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!